

Market Anarchism: Are You Guys Crazy, or Just Nuts?

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After twenty years as a ‘small government’ libertarian, I have spent the last 18 months or so strenuously – and unsuccessfully – resisting the implacable logic of ‘market anarchy’. I started out thinking it was a rather odd theory, but I have come to appreciate some of its finer points, and thought it might be interesting to share some of them with you. If these approaches are correct, then they may help you. If they are incorrect, perhaps you can rescue me from the error of my ways!

‘Market anarchism’ is a broad term referring to the theory that voluntary free market relationships can – and should – replace all existing coercive state relationships. It is derived from taking the principle of the non-initiation of force to its ultimate conclusion, and accepting that if using violence is wrong for one person, then it is wrong for every person. If stealing is wrong for me as a private citizen, then it is also wrong for everyone – including those in the ‘government’.

Much like the theory of relativity, the consistent application of this simple principle can produce rather startling conclusions. If the initiation of force is wrong, then governments as a whole are immoral institutions. Since the only moral agent is the individual (governments don’t ‘act’), then no individual can claim opposing moral rules based on a membership in a certain ‘club’ such as the government. Logically, a man can’t be subject to one moral rule while sitting at home (*thou shalt not kill*), and then be subject to a completely opposite moral rule when he puts on a uniform. The same is true for property rights. If all men have property rights, then no man can morally take the property of another man.

Of course, most people feel very uncomfortable with the idea that society can exist without a government. It might be worth understanding the ‘market anarchist’ responses to typical objections, just for the sake of clarification.

For instance, market anarchists are always asked how a stateless society could deal with violent criminals. We have some excellent answers, of course, but the most relevant is this: *The vast majority of evils in this world are not committed by private criminals, but by governments.*

Or, to put it another way: *The greatest danger to human life is not private vice, but public ‘virtue’.*

In the 20th century alone, credible estimates for the numbers of citizens directly murdered by governments stands at *262 million people*.

Picture this: if the average height of each victim was 5’, laid out end-to-end, the corpses would circle the globe 10 times. This number is *6 times* the number killed in all wars in the 20th century. To this figure we can also add others, such as the number killed by wars - 38.5 million, as well the 60 million killed by malaria as a direct result of worldwide governmental bans on DDT. There are many other ways in which people get killed by government policies, such as:

We could add other crimes as well, such as the endless kidnapping and imprisonment involved in police states and the ‘war on drugs’? The US prison population rose from 488,000 in 1985 to 1.3 million in 2001 to 2.2 million today – half of which are non-violent criminals! One in five US inmates is sexually assaulted? What about the abuse that occurs in state-run orphanages or homes for the elderly? What about the conditions on the native reservations throughout North America? What about the mental and physical abuse that occurs in state schools? What about the family violence that occurs in regimes that do not recognize the rights of women or children? What about the constant infanticide and abortions in China? What about the endless, endless theft of taxation?

Do you see what I mean about prioritizing risks to human life and security?

State crimes are also *qualitatively* different from private crimes. There are many steps that a citizen can take to reduce the likelihood of being victimized by private criminals. From security systems to doormen to moving to a better neighborhood, citizens can directly reduce their risks. For instance, about two-thirds of murder victims knew their murderers – so just hang with the right crowd, and your risk drops significantly. 75% of recent murders in New York were directly related to the drug trade, so stay away from dealing and you're that much safer!

Contrast that to government crimes. What can you do to protect yourself against taxation? Nothing. Everywhere you go, you are taxed. Want to take up arms against the Gestapo? Good luck. Want to escape senseless regulations? Pray for a libertarian afterlife.

Of course, the opposing argument is that criminal violence is like an inverted bell-curve – *lots of state power = lots of violence*, and also *no state power = lots of violence*. However, statistics rarely bear that out. For instance, In 1900, when the government was many times smaller, the U.S. homicide rate was estimated at 1 per 100,000. In 2003, FBI statistics put the rate at 5.7 per 100,000.

In general, within each country, the smaller the government, the lower the violent crime rate – and so who can definitively say that ‘no government’ will naturally produce *more* crime? It would be like saying: *my health improves when my cancer shrinks, but will surely worsen if it disappears completely!*

If we are truly concerned with human suffering, we must rank threats rationally. We must deal with the most life-threatening problems first, and only then proceed to lesser dangers. What would we think of a ER doctor who treated a hangnail *before* dealing with a spurting artery? When citizens face far more danger from government officials than private criminals, is it rational to use our fear of criminals to shy away from exploring the possibility of a stateless society? Of course not! Refusing to consider market anarchism for fear of criminals is like refusing to treat a man dying of cancer because he might someday be hit by a bus.

“Sure,” you might say, “I understand that dictatorships kill lots of people, but we’re all against totalitarianism – just because ‘too much’ state is bad doesn’t automatically mean that ‘any’ state is equally bad!”

I fully understand and sympathize with the intellectual appeal of a ‘small state’, and would find it very compelling, except for historical and current realities, which show that governments never ever stay small. Like a cancer, they continually expand. The smallest state that ever came into being – the American Republic – lasted less than a century before dissolving into internal wars, state-run banking, foreign entanglements, ever-escalating taxation and crushing national debts. For example, the graph below shows US government spending and taxation as a percentage of GDP since 1929.

And, of course, the vast majority of spending increases are on social programs – or, more simply, voter bribing:

Naturally, this rise in government spending increasingly displaces private (voluntary) sectors, just as a cancer displaces healthy cells:

The shortfall in US spending (\$47 trillion dollars as of 2004) will inevitably result in either totalitarianism or bankruptcy (or both!).

There are many reasons for the inevitable increases in state power and corruption, but the main point here is that even if we were able to magically reduce state power to purely Constitutional levels, it would take less than a generation or two for the self-destructive growth to start again.

The government, as an agency of violence, can never be controlled. Like slavery, it can neither be reformed nor ‘managed’, since its very premise – the initiation of the use of force – is immoral, irrational and, in the long run, utterly impractical.

In my view, the libertarian movement is floundering not because we advocate too much freedom, but rather because we do not advocate enough freedom. Our moral vision is constantly compromised and diluted by the violence we advocate for the sake of our ‘small state’ position. But either violence is right or it is wrong. If it is right, how can we quibble about the degree of violence used by the state?

If it is wrong, how can we approve of even a small state?

I look forward to your feedback!